

5842

Center for Children's Advocacy

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TESTIMONY OF THE CENTER FOR CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL NO. 5842, AN ACT CONCERNING FOSTER PLACEMENT AND EDUCATION

February 10, 2009

This testimony is submitted on behalf of the Center for Children's Advocacy, a non-profit organization based at the University of Connecticut School of Law. The Center provides holistic legal services for poor children in Connecticut's communities through individual representation and systemic advocacy.

We strongly endorse Bill No. 5842 which will ensure that a child has the right to remain in her home school even if she is placed into foster care and moved to another town.

School is an integral part of the lives of foster youth, and educational success is vital to their successful transition to adulthood. The youth we represent have already been traumatized by being abused or neglected in their home environment. Often times, a foster child is moved to a home outside of his immediate community and must start over in a new school, typically after the academic year begins. Not only has the child lost his parents and possibly his siblings, but he has lost friends, classmates, a favorite teacher, a coach, music lessons, anything he identified with in his former school.

These Youth Need Our Help

In early 2008, the Center began representing a youth named "Samantha".¹ Between May 2007 and November 2007 Samantha was moved 13 times. When we got her case, she was anxious about the future and unable to connect with people for fear of being taken away from them.

Another client of the Center was "Adam." He was fourteen when he came into foster care. At that time he told us that his favorite class was history, that he wanted to try out for the football and baseball teams, and that he wanted to join the Marines and play college football. Over the course of the next three years, he lived in nine different placements (including two shelters and an emergency foster home) and changed schools at least eight times. After he failed the 10th grade, he described college as a "place I just can't see myself."

School disruptions have devastating short and long-term effects on the education of foster children

- Numerous studies have confirmed that foster children perform significantly worse in school than do children in the general population. The educational deficits of foster children are reflected in higher rates of grade retention; lower scores on standardized tests; and higher absenteeism, tardiness, truancy and dropout rates.

¹ All names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of our clients.

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- Studies have shown that it takes a child approximately four to six months to recover academically from a school transfer²; the educational cost of multiple transfers is potentially devastating.
- Experts have identified school stability as the single most effective way to improve educational outcomes for foster children.³

HB 5842 Benefits Schools and Teachers

Teachers and administrators are forced to scramble to determine the appropriate education program for each new student. Students transferred mid-year may be forced into special education programs to close the gaps between their old curriculum and the new one, programming which comes at great expense to the school district and town.⁴ Frequent student movement can overtax even extraordinary teachers,⁵ interfere with the pace of instruction, and lead to behavioral and social disruptions.⁶ In addition, when foster children fall behind, towns and taxpayers must pay for additional schooling.

Last year during a public hearing on educational stability, a teacher at Hartford High School expressed her frustration as follows:

"Not only does it take a toll on these young people, but it takes a toll on those of us who have to work with them every day because it's heartbreaking to watch these students struggle, not because they're not smart but because there's no time. There are no resources. How am I supposed to catch this girl up, after three and a half marking periods of not being in my class?"⁷

School Stability For Foster Youth Is Now a Federal Mandate

On October 7, 2008, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (PL 110-351) was signed into law. "Fostering Connections" amends the Social Security Act to help hundreds of thousands of children and youth in foster care find permanent families and improve their educational outcomes. The new federal law *requires* child welfare agencies to include "a plan for ensuring the educational stability of the child while in foster care." The agency must also include assurances that it has coordinated with the appropriate school districts to ensure that the child remains in the school in which the child is enrolled at the time of placement. Finally, the new law increases the amount of federal funding that may be used to cover education-related transportation costs for children in foster care.

Fifteen states have taken the lead in promoting school stability for foster children:

² American Bar Association, *Educating Children Without Housing*, 11 (2002).

³ See CASEY FAMILY PROGRAMS, *A ROAD MAP FOR LEARNING: IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES IN FOSTER CARE* 9 (2004).

⁴ See MASON BURLEY & MINA HALPERN, *EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF FOSTER YOUTH: ACHIEVEMENT AND GRADUATION OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN IN STATE CARE* 9 (Wash. State Inst. for Public Policy, 2001).

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Hartman, *Students on the Move*, 63 EDUC. LEADERSHIP, 20-24 (Feb. 2006).

⁷ *An Act Concerning Foster Placement and Education*: Hearing on S.B. 159 Before the Select Comm. on Child. (statement of Bridget Allison), available at <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2008/KIDdata/chr/2008KID00228-R001100-CHR.htm>.

In passing educational stability legislation this year, Connecticut would be following the existing example set by over fifteen other states, including Arkansas, California, Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, Ohio, Oregon, Texas, Virginia, and Washington—all have already created educational stability models for youth in foster care.⁸

No responsible parent would allow his or her child to move from one school to another every few months. The youth we represent are asking only that they be given the chance that many of their fellow students have—to stay in the school that is in their best interests. For the foregoing reasons, we urge you to pass Raised Bill No. 5842, *An Act Concerning Foster Placement and Education*.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

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⁸ See *Fostering School Stability for Children in Connecticut's Care*, (Center for Children's Advocacy et al.) Aug. 2008.